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AN AMERICAN POETIC DRAMA.¹

A DRAMA is primarily a drama, and to be best judged when realistically visualized. It is essentially something that happens, and the happening has for *primum mobile*, character. It may be in verse or prose. In any case the poetry will consist less in the poeticalness of the speeches, or the sentiments expressed as such, than in the beauty of the action—that is, in its passional logic, its psychological fatality of progress. That the chief persons shall be interesting as men and women is indispensable; that some be attractive is desirable. What shall we say, then, of “Ghost of Rosalys?” It is not a good drama. Versification does not diminish, but increase, the necessity for stage technique; it militates against illusion, and thus against a full imaginative realization; it tempts the author to lyric, narrative, and rhetorical digression. So Mr. Moore cannot say: “It is a poem; judge it not by dramatic law.” Nor would he, for he has entitled it “A Play.”

Now his theme, first of all, is excellent. Joyeux loves Rosalys. Youth finds in idealizing passion the inspiration for a career. He will conquer the world for her, and is so busy conquering that he lets her die of ennui. Then he sets vigorously about wooing her ghost. First, as supposedly incarnate in another; then, in her unattainable spirit-being. This is much human history in brief. We all understand what is meant and that it is we who are concerned in the drama, not some other peculiar person.

The story, too, developing this theme of our strange human tendency to forget the end in the means, the essential in the adventitious, is interesting if fantastic.

Joyeux is the dupe of a scoundrel, what we call a “genius for great affairs;” the kind of man we reward these days with many millions and unremitting public attention. He

¹“Ghost of Rosalys: A Play.” By Charles Leonard Moore. Times Printing House, Philadelphia. 1900.

sees his opportunity, and seizes it. Joyeux has great plans; Pierre Herode will furnish the money—at interest. Furthermore, he obligingly provides the men who will see to it that plans never die without heirs. Thus there will be a term to their amicable relations; Pierre Herode will turn the lord out of his manors to build air castles on nothing a year—and love, if he can get it! Truly, the entrance of Joyeux with the casket of jewels which postpones the calamity, in the very nick of time, is a dramatically thrilling event, the most truly such in the entire play. Shock after shock of vital electricity, and everything is *life* again and *hope*. But Rosalys would have it be also *love*. What is spoken by the couple to each other is very good poetry, but over-lyrical, and the splendid Cybele digression out of the question. Mr. Moore quite forgets his rôle as a dramatist, and becomes balladist; he narrates at length, in lieu of suggesting. Mother Gobre, who has been prowling about the manor, enters by the window as Joyeux and Rosalys retire from the scene, and filches the precious casket. We know now that the great pillar of the house has crashed, and that the roof only awaits a breath of wind to fall in upon the inmates.

Yes, on the whole, Act I. is good.

Act II. is stagnant. Clever and good things are spoken; but mere toasts do not constitute action, and Madelon, the witch's daughter, with her suspicious solicitations, and the threat of a duel by Isere, the cousin of Rosalys, can provide a curtain to be sure, but scarcely sufficient dramatic reason for all that has gone before.

In Act III. we are transported to the witch's den. Mother Gobre is shown to be a common "fraud." Our credulity is only taxed in supposing her boy quite so good a swimmer as to keep, otterlike, under the surface, moving swiftly in a circle till he creates a whirlpool, a bottomless abyss of water! Now, surely, this is a grave error in our dramatist. To render his miracles, by furnishing an explanation beforehand, dramatically uninteresting, and then to go in and ask in subsequent scenes that we accept unmurmuringly ghosts, devils, angels! Either I am credulous for the nonce, or I am skeptical. To

be both, as a spectator of the same drama, is difficult. One would think our poet had read Dr. Johnson's elaborate apologies for the supernatural in Shakespeare, and wanted to apprise us that he, of course, had no faith in magic, white or black.

And, frankly, the naïve illusion of Joyeux, who deems himself Adam in Paradise, making a first acquaintance with fire, with earth and sky, with himself, and with woman, is one that would require the utmost powers of make-believe in the spectator, whom unfortunately, the poet has rendered cynically critical by way of preparation. As a first result the Joyeux-Madelon episode becomes vulgar, revolting. So slight a miscalculation as to proper point of view for the audience will spoil all the poet's scenic labors. Raoul's loyal death to save the jewels of Joyeux from Pierre Herode, who has scented them and caused them to be dug up in the witch's cave, and then the trancelike duel in which Isere is killed by Joyeux provide some heroic bustle; but the curtain falls upon a mystification, or rather it fails to fall, it is pulled down by the poet. Now, Act IV. is to redeem the play. Rosalys lies on the bier and the two nuns that have been at their orisons are waxing nervous. Joyeux comes to take their place.

Now the audience is shocked. What? Joyeux dares come into the presence even of that corpse the very night of a vile orgy? True, he was imposed upon. True, he did not intend the sin. True, Madelon had a certain sensual fascination. Yet, would he not hold himself at all responsible? Not before the still purity of his dead wife? No penitence? No anguish of self-reproach? No shame? Surely this is psychologically monstrous!

And what does take place? The ghost of Rosalys comes to persuade him that monism is not true philosophy; that spiritism prevails! Joyeux, however, woos fiercely, he dances with her a ghastly reel; she vanishes and the dazed hero commits suicide over her bier, his head falling forward on the corpse.

Surely here the drama should have ended. And in spite

of Mr. Moore it does. What follows is disquisition in dialogue.

Now, in a vision-scene, Joyeux and Rosalys are united (mind you, not a word of the Madelon business!) and an angel is above them on the Jacob's stair, Lucifer below, each claiming his prey. The argument may be sublime. I do not say that it is not—only that it is irrelevant. Pages of astonishing verse—but no action.

Finally, a farewell between the two ghosts. Yet, though I premise that this latter portion is alien to the drama, let me observe, in passing, that it remains a mystery to me, at all events, why Rosalys is promoted to heaven and Joyeux sent back for purgatorial incarnations. He sinned? So did she! He, boldly? Is courage, then, the essence of evil? Alas, the anæmic virtues of a Rosalys, preferred to the reckless expenditure of energy in Joyeux? The petty vanities of a Rosalys, her fretful self-preoccupation, her mean small-mindedness, deemed less evil than the creative absorption of her husband in his Faustlike dreams of human perfection, than his sensual aberrations? Why should a poet like Mr. Charles Leonard Moore, well-traveled in Hellas, not unknown in Elizabethan English soil, confess to that perversion of ethical judgment whose ecclesiastical expression is Mariolatry?

Now, back from my digression. What shall I say of the poem? It has interested me. I have read it twice and scrupulously observed the poet at his work. I object personally to "does" and "dids" for the rhyme's sake; to "more fast," and "more bad" for no better reason; to "romance" with stress on the first syllable, and other like misaccentuations taken from vulgar speech; to "palls," "immuring"—that is, walling in—when they are but textile fabric; to numerous slips of this sort and verbal syntactical audacities that fail to commend themselves by dramatic effect or poetic charm. Yet Mr. Moore has given me considerable pleasure. He is better than his poem. He is alive. He has inspiration. He is ambitious. His is not a Pegasus that has to be thrashed to come to a mere trot. His has fed at

least on oats, if not always on ambrosia, and Mr. Moore, be it noted, could ride to perfection the usual mount of the contemporary versifier, but he prefers to be thrown by a mettlesome beast, to pick himself up, and vault again to the bareback, for another effort at rough riding! Congratulations!

Indeed, Mr. Moore, you show rare courage; and I think we will applaud *you* more for your failures (for we are Americans) than those dapper rhymsters who never err because they never dare.

Is it impertinent in a mere reviewer to tell the dramatist in Mr. Moore to take up the work of Mr. Moore the poet, and cut cruelly—away with “surplusage—” and bid him then get out a “second edition,” revised, with a good “imprint,” that he may see if all the public will remain indifferent to a good poetic drama, the story of which is well conceived and significant, and the theme universally human and attractive?

WILLIAM NORMAN GUTHRIE.